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ABSTRACT

This autobiographical paper provides an account of the professional growth of a woman who worked as a Head Caregiver in a family center for children aged 6 months to 2 1/2 years. The paper contains observations and thoughts about children, staff interaction, parent-staff interaction, and staff development. An appendix provides samples of materials written for parents. (Author/RH)

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"RUNNING AND SWIRLING AND BANGING INTO WALLS"

Autobiography of a Caregiver

by

Amy Laura Dombro

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I am a thoughtful female girl
who runs and swirls.
I am a person not very tall
and everytime I walk I bang
into a wall.
I am a human being.
It's great to be me.

Marci - Seven years old
Summer, 1973

This poem was written on a summer afternoon at Camp Wapanacki, a camp for visually handicapped children. The girls in my cabin and I spent the afternoon sharing feelings and words and colors.

The children and parents and other teachers at the Family Center have taught me much about my own "running and swirling and banging into walls". I have grown much because of them.

Thank you.

Amy
April, 1978

Introduction

Our growth and development as adults is often hard to see.

Tomorrow morning, April 17, 1978 I will arrive at the Family Center, hang up my coat, put my lunch in the refrigerator and welcome the children and their parents as they arrive. Seven months ago, September 11, 1977, I arrived at the Family Center, hung up my coat, put my lunch in the refrigerator and welcomed parents and their children as they arrived. This year I am working as Head Caregiver at the Family Center at Bank Street. I spend each day with six infants and toddlers (ages six months to two and a half years in September), my co-worker, John, and members of the children's families. I have grown much in relationship to my job since September. This thesis is a record of that growth.

The process of growth involves times of motion and times of stillness for reflection or rest. It has been a challenge to place my record of seven months of my growing within a framework of pages that can be turned in order from Page One to "the end". An account of an actual 15 minutes of the past seven months will serve as the continuing thread of this report. It is an account of a quiet 15 minutes. I will branch off from this thread four times. Each branching off will contain thoughts, observations and memories related to an area of my growth.

1:45 - 2:00 February 28, 1978

I come back after my lunch break.

Growth related to co-worker interaction.

John is sitting on the sofa holding Clara. His body is relaxed against the cushion. It looks as if he is enjoying and experiencing simply holding her. Clara is sucking on her bottle of milk and makes a quiet sound as I walk over and sit on the arm of the sofa. The thought crosses my mind that I would like some time to hold Clara in the same way when John goes to lunch.

Clara reaches towards me and John places her in my arms.

John gets up to get his coat. We talk about whether or not he should get a bologna sandwich.

John Says that G. called while I was out to say her nursing students would begin coming to observe next Tuesday.

Growth related to me as a teacher of adults.

John leaves.

The door opens, J., one of the mothers, comes in. She has some more pictures that she has taken at the Family Center. We look at them, and I tell her we'll hang them up this afternoon. She leaves saying she'll stop by after naps.

Growth related to interaction with parents.

I sit on the sofa holding P. She relaxes into my arms. She holds her bottle with one hand. She gently strokes my wrist with fingers of her free hand. Occasionally, she sucks. The bottle slips down and P. touches her face. She looks directly into my eyes and then at her hands.

Growth related to experience with children.

Our room is quiet and still for now.

1:45 - 2:00 February 28, 1978

I come back after my lunch break.

John is sitting on the sofa holding Clara. His body is relaxed against the cushion. It looks as if he is enjoying and experiencing simply holding her. Clara is sucking on her bottle of milk and makes a quiet sound as I walk over and sit on the arm of the sofa. The thought crosses my mind that I would like some time to hold Clara in the same way when John goes to lunch.

Clara reaches towards me and John places her in my arms.

John gets up to get his coat. We talk about whether or not he should get a bologna sandwich.

* * *

John came to the Family Center for an interview last August wearing an orange suit and carrying a briefcase. I could never have imagined that one day we would be joking about bologna sandwiches.

We had had several long meetings about the choice of caregiver. We were making a very important decision that involved people's young children and thus their values.

August 20

Today I called candidates inviting them for an interview. I could hear formality, a quality of alertness, nervousness, over-politeness in their voices when I said I was calling from the Family Center about the job they had applied for. My heart was pounding, and I felt relieved on those calls when the phone rang and no one answered. I was nervous too.

I thought about how important the decision would be in terms of the Family Center and in terms of my year. The person we chose would be the person I would work closely with every day for the year. I have trouble deciding which pair of shoes to buy. I used to shop on trips home to Vermont because there are fewer stores and thus fewer choices. I knew that I was in the beginning stages of decision-making in the role of a professional.

Interviewing was a new experience for me.

> I remember being interviewed last year by Phyllis, the Head Teacher, and Ellen and Mary, two parents of children in the Family Center. Phyllis later told me that the decision was between me and another person. She was given the final choice. Phyllis said she chose me after much "back and forth thinking". How do you ever know about another person through an interview?

This year I was the staff person asking questions with parents. One of my favorite questions to ask was, "What do you need from the person you are working with to make your job a good place for you?" On advice from Phyllis and Ellen, I listened for how people talked about children they knew.

Looking back, in future situations I will also ask questions to reveal a person's concept of growth - his own as well as that of children. At one point, John answered a question, "I don't know . . . I think that is something I would watch Amy do until I become more experienced." I'd say that much of what I express as a "healthy adult environment" at the Family Center is that John and I and the parents are growing and that we are aware of our growth. It is so easy to see infants and toddlers growing. There are big changes from crawling to walking to running . . . from sounds to single words to sentences to jokes. Sometimes it seems as if the children have gotten bigger over a weekend. It is often hard to see our growth as adults.

John and I worked together setting up the room several days before the program actually began. Again, I wondered how I seemed in the role of the experienced, in-charge person. From what John has said, I looked very different than I was feeling.

September 5, 1977

It is the day before the Family Center opens. I am nervous. This morning, jogging was so relaxing. I woke up with a million thoughts of things to do: jogging somehow helped the confusion of thoughts to flow and become somewhat ordered.

N. and F. are anxious about leaving G., their son. Me, too. What if L. is biting? What about naptime? Will children sleep? Last year at critical times I looked to Phyllis. This year John will look to me, and I don't know if I'll know what to do. What do the parents really think about me when it comes down to actually leaving their children?

September 11, 1977

My feelings at work change very quickly and radically - ranging from "this will be a great year . . . we can set up the aquarium . . . arrange a project with plants . . ." to "what am I doing here" to "let me out of here".

I find myself telling John things to do when I am feeling doubtful, confused, closed in.

I wonder if I look and act like I feel?

Children are experiencing separation each morning. I find it draining, confusing, and scary. There is a terrific amount of feelings around - those of parents, children, John and me. At this point I can acknowledge the intensity and discomfort but can't sort out what feelings are coming from where and what I should do in response.

I had the "let me out of here" feeling on Friday after K. cried off and on for almost two hours. On Thursday I felt, "This is really hard for you, K., and I'll help you as much as I can."

On Friday I found myself walking up and down the hall with P. and K. - back and forth and back and forth - feeling that I desperately wanted to get away, while John was sitting alone on the sofa in our room. I just couldn't let go of the situation and relax enough to take advantage of another adult being around. I also couldn't check in with John to see how he was doing, to try to explain how hard separation is. As a matter of fact, I didn't even think about trying to ease the situation for John, who was just beginning a new job with a new age group. My thoughts at the time were, "John should come out here and help me. He is probably feeling much more calm and able to cope than I am."

At the beginning of the year, when I wasn't too tired to think, I thought about two related issues:

A. As the experienced, "in-charge" person, there were many things I had to tell John about the program and living through the day with a group of infants and toddlers and their parents.

B. As a person working with another person, I didn't want to stifle John. We are two individuals. I am a white woman who listened to my first Beatle album at Ann Hedgepath's birthday in the sixth grade . . . John is a black man who remembers hanging out on the street with friends and music when he was very young . . . and we are a team.

These two concerns were mine along with a tremendous sense of responsibility for running the program and literally getting us through the first weeks and days. I decided to tell John that at the beginning I would call the shots to get us started, with the idea that as routines became established and as we got to know the children and each other, "our style" vs. "my style out of last year's experience" would evolve.

As our style <u>has</u> evolved, the question of our rhythm (perhaps in some ways related to the difference between Ann Hedgepath's sixth grade birthday and hanging out) in moving with a group of children has evolved. There are times when I feel John moves in much too slowly. There are times when he feels I should slow down and relax.

October 31

The "rhythm" of the adults I work with influences me. Today John was sluggish. Rather then adapting myself and the day to his rhythm, I found myself feeling tight, pressured and encouraging him to follow my tempo. I visualize on one level that caregivers should balance each other out. For example, on one of John's "slow" days, I can make the trip to the bathroom and change pampers after lunch while John begins reading with the children. On another level, I feel that there is need for the caregivers to maintain regularity in terms of routines and overall feeling quality of the room, no matter how we as individuals are feeling. I want to explore John's tempo by letting it set the pace a little more, keeping the following thoughts in mind . . .

A. My need for tempo-setting may stem from my need to control which is lessening a little as I am feeling more comfortable and confident about being responsible for the program.

B. If I feel that John needs to consciously move in a little faster, I will bring it up and we will work on it.

C. Some days are out-of-kilter days.

D. Maybe I will learn something about my own rhythm - I wonder if I am inflexible?

October 31

Lunchtime - It seems we give out food, children eat and then leave the table. There is some talking and laughing, but overall, lunchtime feels "jerky" to me. Several possible reasons . . .

A. Age of the children (mostly 18 months now) - I think the "calm talking-together lunches" I remember from last year were at the end of the year when most children were around 30 months.

B. We adults may not have our routine smooth enough. Sometimes I feel we talk to each other too much, thus not moving in immediately, when, for example, K. gestures for juice. On the other hand, how realistic is it to move in immediately? And isn't moving in immediately "jerky" and unrelaxed itself? A compromise between moving in too slowly and feeling constantly on-alert to every need is called for, I think after talking this through with John. After many days of finding myself "on-alert" to compensate for what I felt was John's slowness . . . after realizing that I was beginning to make lunchtime uncomfortable for the adults . . . We decided that we would get food and drink out quickly and then move in a more relaxed way.

John has done an incredible amount of growing this year. I would like to include some of his comments from an evaluation that we did to share our perspectives of the program, ourselves, and each other in response to the parents' evaluation. Though the growing is John's and reflects him as a person, I feel proud that someone working with me could grow so much. I feel that his growing reflects some of my growth in learning to work with another person.

John's comments on the program:

A. I've been impressed with the parents' sensitivity to me and with their concern for a good program.

B. I've always wanted a job that made me feel like getting up in the morning and this is it.

C. At the beginning of the year I thought I was just going to play with the children. Now I realize that this work is very important and how important I am to the children and the Family Center.

His comments on working with me:

A. Amy had faith in me. She gave me enough room to try things out on my own.

B. Important things I have learned from Amy.

- reinforced my respect for the children
- reinforced my awareness of a child as an individual
- the way she talks and moves with the children
- we have talked about feelings caused by fact that some children are more attached to Amy than to me.
- more about how to make each child feel more important
- how to understand and deal with the new groups

C. She is a good listener and makes me feel comfortable.

D. I want her to be more direct with me.

John and I have grown as a team. Our growing has been an integral part of our work with the children and parents at the Family Center.

> This fall John wrote a paper about racial awareness and young children for one of his classes at City College. He researched the literature and his paper was a well documented research paper. Several weeks later we began to talk about racial awareness of the children at the Family Center. We wondered if M., the baby this year, realized that we were different colors. We wondered how K., a black child, perceived my color. We wondered about much.
>
> At about this time we began to talk about our racial awareness. I had greens for the first time when John's mother invited me to dinner. John opened the door saying, "Guess who is coming for dinner?". Some of the parents took part in our discussion. John had never known what it meant for a white person to be fair skinned. I hadn't known that using a hair pick could hurt. We shared reactions of people on the street when they see us together with children.

John, you have been a very important part of my year.

John says that G. called while I was out to say her nursing students would begin coming to observe next Tuesday.

John leaves.

O. and I were sitting on the floor building block towers when the first student nurse arrived on Tuesday morning. She walked tentatively over to us. I called out hello and introduced O. and myself. She said her name was P. and sat down on the sofa's edge. It was quiet for a moment and then I began talking about the day at the Family Center. In that moment of quiet I realized she was looking at me - me dressed in old blue jeans and socks with holes sitting on the floor building with blocks - as the person in charge. That Tuesday I became P.'s teacher. My plan was to watch the children through her eyes as much as possible and to offer some of my observations to her.

Seeing myself as one who can teach adults about children is a new facet of who I see when I look in a mirror. I have learned that teaching adults about very young children involves teaching adults a little about themselves and has also involved learning about myself. This year I have taught some adults about very young children.

I supervised L., a student teacher in Bank Street's Program in Infant and Parent Development, during the semester she worked at the Family Center. At the semester's end we said goodbye to L. She had become an important person to the children, the parents, and to John and me. We read L. a book I wrote during her last week at the Family Center. On the last day I thought about L.'s experience. I felt she had learned much - some of which she realized as she left - some of which she would realize after more experience and time - some of which she would realize when she supervised a student teacher for the first time. I thought about how much I had learned teaching L. - some things I learned from our interaction between September and January; others were realizations springing from experiences I had some time ago; still others I will realize only as I have more experience teaching adults.

Becoming a teacher of adults has involved the process of beginning to see myself as a teacher of adults. It was a process that began the very first days of the Family Center . . . . . .

September 12, 1977

I came home feeling very tired and mostly disappointed in myself. Today I acted like a first class beginner. I talked about my feelings of insecurity when parents were there dropping off their children. No one needed to be told there was crying and confusion - it could clearly be seen and heard. As I look back, it was just what one would expect on the first morning with six children, including a six month old and an eleven month old, in the pangs of separation misery. Any pretense I had of being in charge slipped away for awhile. I jogged all the way to 119th Street without stopping on the force and energy from my feelings about today.

October 31, 1977

I am supervising someone for the first time. At the beginning I found myself asking L. if she wanted, for example, to go outside or stay in with a group of children. It was as if I was calling a friend and asking if she wanted to see "Side by Side" or "A Chorus Line". My choice-giving created confusion and was inappropriate. Now I offer a choice within a framework, so there is not so much confusion. I say now, "Today some of us are going outside and one adult can stay in with C. and wait for K. to come. Which would you like to do?" Now sometimes I tell L. what she is going to do and don't offer any choice.

November 2, 1977

L. began working at the Family Center at the beginning of September. At first I felt nervous around her. I wondered how I appeared as the person in charge. When she started, I had a feeling of friends . . . that we were in this together. Over the past three weeks I have felt a separation . . . that in some ways I have distanced myself. One day L. came bursting in talking about her weekend. She sat on the couch and talked loudly, interrupting the mood of the room. In my "friend" stage, I think I would have been aware of the loudness but would have talked about the weekend then and there. Instead, I said, "Come on over here with us. C. is having a little trouble feeling settled. Let's get C. and G. ready to go outside and tell me about your weekend once we get walking". I feel I can work with L., have a relationship that is friendly and still be able to watch and supervise what she is doing.

January 1978

Moving into the new space upstairs has meant moving closer to the other two Family Center groups. Visiting back and forth has become an issue to be considered.

On Thursday E. came in and asked me if she could leave an 11 month old with us for two hours that afternoon while her group went on a trip to the movies. I said, "No". Many thoughts went through my mind:

A. It was best for the child, for our group and for future visiting policies to say no. I would say no;

B. E. would probably get mad . . . I think that through her eyes it would seem like I said no to a simple favor;

C. E. would mention the incident to other people, and they might get mad at me too.

I said, "No". I listened to E. repeat her problem. I was about to say, "Well, let me think about it . . . maybe we can work something out", while still thinking, "No", and then I thought, "I have good reason to stick with "No" . . . "Let's see what'll happen". I remembered a time last year when I found myself sitting and clutching the sofa arm listening to Phyllis disagree with a parent, anticipating with fear the parent's response. Dorothy, the Director of the program in Infant and Parent Development was visiting Liz that day and was standing close. I felt quite sure she was listening to what E. and I were saying. I wanted to make the right decision in front of her. Part of my wanting to say, "let's talk about it later" was that I could talk to E. when Dorothy wouldn't be there. After saying "No" to E. twice, I noticed Dorothy moving and realized she was nodding in support of my decision. A sense of relief . . . a sense of pride . . .

I realized that E.'s annoyance at me could be an important step in her development as a caregiver. As we ended the discussion, I felt like a teacher rather than someone who must rush in to smooth things over.

I often find visitors distracting. I usually have a sense of our room and group of children (a sense of balance or unbalance) and feel I know where I should move in and how. When people show up, I lose my overview. At the beginning, I am going to tightly control the visiting in our room, making my needs and the needs of our group very clear.

Slowly the children of the different groups are beginning to get to know each other. Slowly, we as staff, are beginning to know each other. I notice that people now stand at the door and ask if it is a good time to come in to our room. I have made a stand, people have been annoyed at me, I stood firm, and patterns of visiting have evolved.

February 28, 1978

I am seeing that teaching people about children involves a constant on-going process. One day M. and two children from her room came for an afternoon visit to make playdough. John and I and four of our children were in the room when our visitors arrived. I had to go to the bathroom and told John I was leaving for a few minutes. I have watched M. often walk away, leaving her co-teacher in an awkward position. I decided to tell her that I was leaving the room for a few minutes, adding "That means you and John will be the only adults here". (I shared a total picture of the room with her, a concept, which, I think, M. is just beginning to develop.) She seemed a little surprised - and said, "Sure". As I walked out, I noticed M. moving into a more central position in the room. This was a simple, two-minute interaction. You never know which two-minute interaction may hit home with the message that there is an overall view of the room always to consider. On the one hand, it is an obvious message, on the other, a very complex, "understood only with experience" one.

Early this year I became interested in reading autobiographies. A whole new section of the library has opened up to me, much like the new level of feeling which has opened up in the past two years. When I read, words expressing emotion have new meaning for me, as I am more clearly able to feel my own feelings (frustration, anger, sadness, as well as happiness and excitement). This is growing since I've been at Bank Street. I feel Nancy, my advisor, took my stages of development into account in her role as teacher of an adult-me. (Nancy, I had a vague sense that you were aware of my growth two years ago. Now I am beginning to see a little of what you were seeing about me then. You, as my teacher, have influenced me as a teacher of other adults.)

I can remember Nancy saying, "It must be hard to come from Vermont to New York City", or "How does it make you feel to work with a parent whom you know beats her child?". I couldn't even acknowledge that I was undergoing adjustment having moved to the city. I used to say "It scares me to be around screaming mothers", with a smile. I think now I was so overwhelmed in these situations that I had to have everything be O.K. (or even good) until I could relax enough to begin seeing what was really there. For example, it took me from September to December even to say, "There are parts of New York City that I don't like". I think that Nancy's awareness of me and her sense of timing were important ingredients of my learning. She could offer thoughts, watch them be passed by or ignored (as part of my coping style dictated), move on to discuss other things and come back to offer possible feelings again for me to consider another time. She knew that the ability to feel feelings and to acknowledge them required a lot of growing and discovering on my part. It still does.

I wonder if she ever felt frustrated?

I think that at another time in my life, the same people and events that I see as markers of a path my growing has taken, would have led in a different direction.

This has been a year of "increasing awareness" for me. I have new feelings, or perhaps it is more valid to say new acknowledgement of feelings.

> Two years ago, I spent two days a week at the "I-Care Program" at New York Foundling Hospital, a program for abusive mothers and abused children. As part of this field placement, I modeled adult-child interaction for mothers who literally didn't talk to their children, let alone play with them. Occasionally children came into the nursery with new bruises. One afternoon, I watched staff intervene with a mother who was screaming and striking her child. I knew that what was going on was serious and powerful. Knowing is different than feeling. Another time, I walked to the subway with a mother who had been responsible for the death of one of her children . . . we talked about the weather as I remember.
>
> A year later I crossed the street with a woman who was dragging her son across Broadway. As we got to the curb, he tripped. She yanked him up with a sharp slap on his face. I felt a streak of fury and my eyes were full of tears. A year later, on that street corner, I felt more than I had during a whole semester at Foundling.

Looking back, I think I must have been a very difficult student for my supervisor at Foundling to work with. She was aware of my lack of comprehension and eventually became annoyed with me. Nancy stuck it out with me. Looking back, I see that she offered me chances to talk about what I was seeing and feeling, chances which I, for the most part, passed by because I couldn't see or feel such things. I remember one conference where I acknowledged a feeling of tightening up at the screaming. Nancy seemed to jump in commenting, "You are seeing and hearing things that you have no experience with . . . you should be frightened". I see that Nancy offered me chances in a caring, careful way. She didn't force, but constantly presented me with chances to express my feelings. At a more basic level, she presented me with possibilities of what I might be feeling but was not able to express. I often asked myself, "What is she talking about? . . . of course I feel frightened . . . let's go on to the next subject". Two years later, I am still putting together pieces from our talks.

October 31, 1977

I am becoming a little more comfortable with uncomfortable feelings: The fact that I can wait and look at things that are a little uncomfortable or unresolved and see them as such, opens up a whole new world. It is related to the need for control. I can sometimes now listen a little more without jumping into a conversation to resolve or smooth things over. I can see a person feeling uncomfortable and wait and see what will be said which I have never done before. Today, L. and I had a weekly conference. I met her in the cafeteria. As I sat down, L. said, "I really don't have anything to talk about today." "O.K." - and I took a bite of my tunafish. In the silence, L. said, "But there was only one thing about this morning." We ended up talking about that one thing for 40 minutes.

My vocabulary is developing with my acknowledgement of feelings. I have new words to describe what I see and feel. Before, my range of feeling words was happy to sad to mad. Angry, disappointed, exhausted, excited are basics which seldom came to mind. I've found that many people have "more feeling words" than I do. Mike, a friend of mine who is developing into an artist, and I spent an afternoon recently touring SoHo Galleries. My descriptions of reactions to paintings were flat and lifeless next to Mike's. New feelings, new words . . .

I am aware of a new sense of realness about me. I feel I am coming across more as a real person instead of someone sitting around smiling, saying everthing is fine. This developing seems to be confirmed by the fact that people are relating in new ways to me . . . people are sharing real things about their lives with me. People are teaching me things and now I also see people are learning things from me.

I still have much to learn and many questions as I think about teachers I have had as an adult and teaching I have done.

> Last Sunday I stopped by to say goodbye to Jay, a friend. He was watching T.V.: an opera coach and two singers rehearsing for a performance of Don Giovanni. Jay asked if I knew Don Giovanni, and I said, "No". Jay walked into the kitchen to throw away his cantaloupe. On his return I asked, "Is that Don Giovanni?", pointing to the coach. Jay said, "No" and began to tell me about the opera. I felt foolish and began to laugh, stopping when I realized that his response held no teasing in it. Why should I feel foolish? I should feel rich and excited as I stand on the edge of a brand new body of knowledge - music.

In my interaction with L. . . . some isolated exchanges look like we were best friends, some look like I am definitely the teacher and she is the student. How do they all fit together in our relationship in which I am the supervisor of her student teaching experience?

February 15, 1978

Often when there is an observer, I find myself feeling fumbly or thinking, "I wish I would have handled that in a different way." Sometimes when we are the only people in the room, I think, "What should I do about _____ or that wasn't right." But I don't feel fumbly. I have felt and seen my feeling fumbly influence John and the children. I really don't feel fumbly about myself and my work at the Family Center. In many ways I am feeling competent. I know there are many things to learn, but I am figuring out ways to learn them. When I do things wrong, I know that the program is strong enough, John and the children are strong enough so that I will have another chance to try. These feelings are mine and yet I still do feel fumbly with visitors around.

My actions are appearing clearer to me (this is reflected in something that Nancy and I have talked about - my language is becoming clearer as my thinking is becoming clearer). I can more clearly make a mistake, can say clearly, "I don't know" and can more clearly see myself make a right decision.

The door opens, J., one of the mothers, comes in. She has some more pictures that she has taken at the Family Center. We look at them, and I tell her we'll hang them up this afternoon. She leaves saying she'll stop by after naps.

taking pictures of the children

reviewing Saturday Night Fever

exchanging recipes . . . maple syrup cookies, beansprout pie

discussing how children's clothes reflect parent's style of dress

a hug

a parent walking into a confusing situation and helping a group of children, thus influencing the whole room's feeling

music playing for R. in the morning

trips to the pet store, siphoning, reading and finally establishing a balanced fish tank

placing bottles together at the end of the day to avoid hunting under the sofa and behind cribs at the end of a busy day

hunting under the sofa and behind the cribs for bottles at the end of the day

the "4:00 Pamper Check" so that parents will find dry children for the trip home

"Hi . . . what can I do to help?"

"I'm in a rush . . . see you tomorrow."

Serious discussions of "Do you think my child has fun?" and of "What is your thinking behind _____?"

Realizing that _____ and _____ forgot to bring pampers again

explaining a scratch or bump that wasn't there in the morning

parent-staff meetings once a month (see appendix for materials parents and staff have written)

Last spring I met many prospective parents who came with their children to visit the Family Center. I found myself looking at them wondering how we would get along if they were in the Family Center. I wondered about what they thought when they were told that I would be continuing staff person.

By June I had a list of names of the families that I would be spending the next year with. Three of the families were continuing. Six of the families were brand new.

In August we began looking for a second staff person. The parents and I had a meeting. Parent-staff interaction had officially begun. I took a look around at these people . . . these people who would be a significant part of my year. I wondered who they were seeing.

One of my major concerns about myself and my ability to interact with parents was my tendency to smooth over even hints of conflict, disagreement or unsettledness. I feared that my reliability would be very questionable if I painted a world free of conflict. It has been my experience that adults feel a wide range of feelings where very young children are concerned. I have grown. I have been able to see someone feel conflict, and I have felt it strongly myself. There are times this year when I've also smoothed over feelings, mine as well as others. This will be an area to grow in, probably for my whole life.

August 26, 1977

S., a new parent, called me this morning. She has called four to five times in the week to suggest candidates for the second teacher. She strikes me as sharp and intelligent, and I felt a little intimidated by her at our first meeting. On the phone, I found myself sounding too "goody".

For example, a man whom she had contacted came for an interview. She called to say he would be an hour late. I said, "I'm sorry he misunderstood my directions." S. said, "It wasn't your fault" (which it wasn't, since, as it turned out, he had lost the address). This morning when S. called, I let her do the talking. I responded to what she said but didn't "pad" up her statements. Sometimes I'm afraid to let a statement stand clear out in the open, especially if it has a quality of unsettledness or conflict. The "padding" is what I do to smooth things over - it is what sounds "goody" and unrealistic.

November 2, 1977

A., one of the mothers, came today for about half an hour. I get the feeling that both she and F. want to talk about their son but just can't get started. Sometimes I just fish around by talking about all sorts of little things he has been doing, hoping they will catch on to a conversation starter. So far that strategy hasn't worked. I still feel though, that they really do want to talk. Their "everything is fine" hustle bustle used to say to me everything is fine. I remember being very surprised when A. called one of the first days to see how R. was doing. I had really thought that she was not nervous at all. One morning as F. and I were talking, he began walking to the elevator while carrying on the conversation. He held the "door open" button as we continued our conversation. I get the feeling that they both want to talk on one level but are afraid/threatened/unsure on another level. I don't know what to try next.

I am becoming better at watching people's actions, listening to their words and at seeing patterns or clues to the thoughts behind the actions and words. I find myself for the first time making choices as to what I want to respond to, the message I see or the thought or feeling I think might lie behind it. I am also feeling more able to see thoughts develop.

November 13, 1977

M. came to pick P. up and found her holding a breadstick which another parent had just given her. All day long I had been very aware of what P. was eating, offering her snacks of yogurt instead of carbohydrates. I left the room to wash dishes; I came back to find M. feeding P. peas left from her lunch and talking to P. saying, "peas . . . a good snack". I decided that I would speak to the thought behind the words and action. I explained that P. had just been given the breadstick.

I was aware of the growing I wanted to do in the area of parent-staff interaction. By November I began to feel aware of the other adults and the parts they played in the dynamics of parent-staff interaction. I found that as we were getting to know each other, we more often exchanged personal perspectives about the children, the Family Center and about each other.

October 31, 1977

The question of definition of professional is raised here for me. How much should or can one separate personal feeling/mood from how one interacts with children? The Family Center is a hard place for me to sense distinction between personal/professional for myself. The level of involvement with parents has inherent in it getting to know each other as people. I wonder if the line between professional/personal is affected by the age children you are working with and by the setting. I tend to think that people are acting easily on a basic feeling level with infants/toddlers that might be different with older children. I often hear parents talk about their own memories of childhood and their parents.

November 12, 1977

My own parents in a real way have much influence on the Family Center. I am sure that much of their parenting is the basis for how I work with the children. One day I was helping a child take his nap. I said, "It's O.K., lie down and I'll scratch your back." I began singing "would you like to swing on a star . . .". I walked out of the nap room realizing with a shock that that had been my sleeping ritual when I was young.

I, as staff, have a feeling for parents as people and sense that they have a feeling for me . . . an integral part of our parent-staff interaction.

I also have a sense that I am a professional who was hired by a group of parents.

October 31, 1977

What is my role in a parent-staff co-op? I wonder if I'm being taken advantage of? Meetings before work, after work and time for preparation. Parents come to a steering committee meeting after a full day's work. On the one hand, I feel if they will come then so should I. On the other hand, they have finished a day's work and are putting time in on another interest (the Family Center), while I am, in effect, still at work. When do I have time for my quilt or braille lessons or friends during the week?

October 31, 1977

I remember a class last year where a woman in her late 30's was being forced to resign from her job as director of a school. She talked about the fact that she was always honest and open with her feelings and thoughts and that some of the people she had been most open and honest with were the ones forcing her out. "It took me 38 years to learn that people really don't care", she said. Last year I was sick for a month with mononucleosis. I was home, and as I got ready to come back to work and New York, I explained to my dad how we would work out my coming back to work so that I wouldn't over-do it. "We" were the people of the Family Center. Dad told me to be careful, because the parents' first concern would really be getting things back to normal. This was different from planning for me not to over-do.

I have skills working with children and adults that reflect the combination of me as a person and my professional training. I sense a strength in the balance I am developing between me as a person and me as a professional. I think these two examples of parent-staff interaction reflect this balance.

January 13, 1978

This morning R. began talking. Over the weekend, T. (his son) had been taking toys from another child whom they were visiting.

Me: How did that make you feel?

R: I remembered watching S. (another child in the Family Center) when he was T.'s age. Before the Family Center, I would have responded very differently. I would have been very scared T. was turning into a bully. I would have gotten very angry at him. I guess it is just a part of development that we will have to figure out how to deal with.

November 29, 1977

When I got home, I found messages from John and from a family. My first thought was that someone had been hurt. Each had called several times. There were two incidents . . . One - when G. got home she found that her son's thermos had broken. She wanted to be sure that we hadn't given him juice with glass in it. We remembered looking in his glass that day to see what kind of juice he had. I called G. and P. and suggested that perhaps the thermos had broken on the way home. Instead of a response of relief which I expected, they were very upset that L. had had diarrhea that day. It was late and I said, "Let's talk tomorrow." I was feeling annoyed and nervous at the same time. I thought a lot that night about what I should say to P. that morning . . . if I should let him speak first . . .

That afternoon G. stopped early to get L., and she invited me to dinner so we could talk. She said that his diarrhea was really concerning her. When I got there, G. was making dinner. We began talking about L.'s diarrhea, and she expressed concern that it was from his being at the Center. We talked, and I made sure that we developed an approach, a strategy of things to try. I was still feeling kind of annoyed at this intensity. L. had had diarrhea before. We ended up saying A) our health committe should be notified and asked if they could help us look for possible causes, B) L. would eat only the food that was sent from home, C) P. said that he would like to have all food in the refrigerator covered (I made sure the next day to have a box of baggies). By the time the chicken had finished baking our conversation had dropped off. I remember thinking, "Now what are we going to talk about . . . it seems that the fury has ended."

This is part of our conversation that followed:

G.- "I'm not ashamed to tell her when I first saw L. drink with a cup I wept . . . I felt sad and proud . . . I am missing so much of his development.

Me- "Hard . . ."

G. began talking. Her sentences came out with a burst - the essence of what she said was--if L. had to choose right now between the three of us, he would probably choose P., his father, first, then me, then G.

It was quiet.

At this point my heart was beating fast. I thought, "Is this really happening to me?" . . . I felt, "Easy does it . . . what you say, Amy Dombro, is going to be very important to these people . . . you can't smile this one off." P. and G. were really talking to me in my role as Head Teacher at the Family Center, not as Amy Dombro who had felt sad leaving her mom and dad or who had asked her mother to go shopping and help her pick out a skirt. I said, "Go ahead G., but remembe that when you are finished it will be my turn to talk."

She continued and listed several times that she had come to pick up L. and he had shown little interest or he had cried one day when I was holding him and G. had reached to get him. At home, L. was following P. around. G. said how much it hurt her when L. fell down and she went over to pick him up and he leaned over for P.

I felt respect for G. and proud to be me.

Comments I made . . .

I said I had never heard a parent so clearly and openly discuss this subject even though I know it is one that concerns everyone. I asked, "Haven't you heard joking comments - ah, you don't want to come home now - when parents come and children ignore them or act hesitantly?"

I talked about different levels of attachment . . . "L. is attached on one level to John and me . . . but, O.K., look at this. L. had just finished spilling his glass of grape juice. G. had gasped and then said - its O.K., L. She had commented to me that L. responds to the tone of her voice even if she was just telling P. that L. had spilled the juice and had directed nothing to L." I said, "Often at lunch things spill and I am sure that sometimes my voice has sounded disturbed. L. has never once responded to my voice. He doesn't have that much invested. He isn't that tuned in to me. This is what I had meant by different levels of attachment."

I said that children do have fun at the F.C., but look at S. He is going through a phase of walking into the room and picking up a toy to play with immediately. He continues to play as his mom and dad leave. Two or three minutes after they are out of the door he turns around saying, "maman-poppa".

Interpretation #1: He loves this place - comes in - he is so happy to be here and gets so involved that he doesn't care what his parents are doing, but then why would he ask for them?

Interpretation #2: He is working on a way to say goodbye. Look at this situation from his point of view. Perhaps detaching himself before they leave is his way of coping with a painful situation.

I asked, "What do you think L. is seeing/thinking? What happens here in the morning? You leave for work and then L. and P. have breakfast . . . you said you feel like he is leaving you . . . how do you think it looks to him?"

G. kept speaking but her pauses were expectant, and I got the feeling she was really hanging on to what I said.

I couldn't and didn't make the statement that five day a week care is the best thing for L. L.'s parents knew his days were long and that he was missing a lot not being with them. Now they had no other option.

I said our program is good which perhaps makes things harder to see. If children were miserable, it might be harder to think you are being replaced. It is important to remember that even in a good program, children and adults and caregivers are constantly dealing with the event of separation.

Parent-caregiver relationships . . . . . complex to say the least.

I sit on the sofa holding P. She relaxes into my arms. She holds her bottle with one hand. She gently strokes my wrist with fingers of her free hand. Occasionally, she sucks. The bottle slips down and P. touches her face. She looks directly into my eyes and then at her hands.

Our room is quiet and still for now.

Knowing very young people has led me to thinking much about growth. Moving is a way in which children interact with the world and thus grow.

Four weeks ago, after more and more purposeful crawling, C. pulled herself up into a standing position by the table. J., C., O., and I were making playdough that day. C. laughed as we sprinkled "flour powder" on her hand. Yesterday C. picked up a cookie cutter in one hand and a piece of playdough in the other. She stood alone by the table for several minutes. There is a definite relationship between learning to walk and discovering new things in your world.

August 22, 1977

D. brought J. this morning. J. is 20 months old. He is solidly built. I felt I approached J. through the medium of movement as well as through the words and things I offered him. We spent three minutes facing each other moving our heads from side to side, with pauses filled with laughing and looking at each other . . . a conversation in movement. This was a first feel for each other through J.'s major mode of exploring the world.

August 22, 1977

Eleven-month old C., who had taken his first steps four days ago, stood bouncing before taking a forward step. J. stood by C. and, imitating, took several steps preceded with the same bouncing. I remember last year when J. (already a walker) crawled down the hall with S. He seems to renew contact with the stage he has just come through, moving back, then forward again.

November 10, 1977

R. was crying. O. came over carrying her bottle and tapped her leg with it. I was very surprised that it was O. when I looked down. It struck me that I really don't know him through all his moving. It is hard for me to be around a child who is in constant motion. My reaction is something I have thought a lot about. I think I could and should react differently if I could figure out a little more about it. Every now and then I find myself "flowing" with O.'s movement. I get the feel of his motion as being his language . . . his way of exploring the world. I know other adults respond differently. L. and John move, laugh . . . enjoy O. I wonder again about my need to control . . . or to keep things smooth and calm.

I wonder about my ability to move and what movement means to me. I have decided to keep jogging whenever I can. After four months I have reached a new level of jogging . . . a new endurance. I remember very few times of really moving freely. I remember pounding the tennis ball over the net at my Dad last summer at a time when I was angry at him. It was a relief, and I remember realizing that I was crying as those serves flew over the net. I remember jogging with Jay this summer. He ran hard, really worked at running, and he really pushed me to keep up. Later that summer I was trying to really push myself running up the hill of our road. The thought crossed my mind, "Come on you won't break", my next thought was that I have lived many years with a brother who literally does break (Timmy has osteo-genesis imperfecto or brittle bones), if he moves too roughly or is bumped. Movement is very important and natural to my other brother, Barry.

I remember my Mom telling me a story about when I was two and went from eye doctor to eye doctor because something was embedded in my eye that no one could get out. She said that finally one man located a speck of metal and removed it. It took a long time. Mom said he asked her and Dad if they had drugged me because after having it explained to me, I lay very still and quietly while he worked. I remember dancing at Camp Wapanacki one night for hours in the rec hall . . . the exhilarating feeling of filling all the space moving and twirling and laughing.

Movement and what it means to me is an issue that working with young children had led me to explore.

I have begun to envision a "movement" of the process of growth. I conceptualize a back and forth motion as new experiences and ideas are compared to the old or perhaps are reviewed . . . as experiences combine to form new meanings.

October 10, 1977

T., D., F. and I were together for the last hour today. T., D., and I were playing rumbling, tumbling games on the floor . . . rolling on the floor, tickling tummies. I swept them up into the air. F. came over several times into the area where we were playing and said, "Not me . . . don't touch me". I felt he was saying the opposite with his actions and I swooped him up in my arms after making approaching sounds and saying what I was going to do. He froze. We kept playing, and I noticed that F. was watching. I said, "Why don't you come over here and be close with us . . . I won't swooch you up." He came over smiling. During a pause in our tumbling, D. came very close looking at my necklace and touching it. I noticed with a start that F., too, had come close and was fiddling with my necklace. I began to think that as I get to know F. I'll let him approach me physically. About 15 minutes later, D. and T. and I had gone into the hallway. F. was climbing and jumping off the overturned boat in our room. I stepped out into the hallway staying within F.'s sight. T. ran into my legs laughing and a game began where D. and T. ran from the end of the hall into my arms and I would swing them around. The more laughing that we did in the hallway, the more talking to me it seemed F. did. F. was suddenly down at the end of the hall running into my arms too.

I see periods of time in growth where direct purposeful movement is made as well as periods of time for the stillness of reflecting, practicing, or resting.

February 28, 1978

Waiting for a subway early one morning after a late, rainy night feature of Star Wars, Judson and I discussed which one of the two men the princess really liked the best. I realized that two years ago, my choice (thinking as the princess, of course) would have immediately been Luke - quiet, clearly predictable, dependable. That night my choice wasn't immediate, and after some side of the track conversation, I (speaking for the princess) chose the other man who seemed not so quiet, not so clearly predictable, but much more real and interesting. I wonder who I (thinking and speaking for myself) would choose?

J. comes into the Family Center each day with a different hat . . . a magician's black top hat, a policeman's hat, a baseball cap . . . I watch him pretending to make things appear and disappear. I watch him closing the door for the security guard's job. I watch him experimenting with control.

A discussion of a Star Wars' princess . . . wearing different hats . . . exploration and experimentation with new feelings and awareness.

Learning and growth do not occur at one moment of time and then are completed.

March 1, 1978

We celebrated J.'s second birthday in late December. He looked a little confused as we sang "Happy Birthday". He ate cake, clapped with everyone, and left the table to move onto other things that Friday afternoon. One month later, J. found a picture of candles and began singing "Happy Birthday, Dear J." with a laugh of excitement.

Last year in a class, Nancy suggested discussing and showing holiday pictures after as well as before the holiday with young children . . . though I think any age could enjoy the idea. Last Sunday, Allen and I looked through old slides of Camp. It was fun to share remembering.

November 10, 1977

J. brought a bouquet of daisies on his first day at the Family Center. Over that weekend I came to work in the Family Center and noticed the dead daisies. I made a deliberate decision to leave the flowers until Monday - (At Halloween time L. and P. had carved a pumpkin. I arrived first on the Monday morning and the Jack-O-Latern which had been out all weekend, had begun to collapse and smell. Upon entering the room, I tossed it into the trashcan, even before taking my coat off, collapsing it all the way. When L. came in later that morning, she asked where the pumpkin was, and when P. came in, he asked too. John's first comment that same morning "Where is the pumpkin?" I had acted too quickly.) On this Monday, J. said, "There are the daisies" several times. He asked why they had died. We talked about the dead daisies for many days.

I really wasn't sure what to say about why flowers die. The thought that J. would react to dead flowers and that I would have to react to J. had crossed my mind with the decision not to toss the flowers out.

February 21, 1978

My concept of growing and its sense of movement continues to develop. I now envision this continuum:

categorization_____integration

less_____more growth

I used to mark growth (and still do in ways . . . I feel more aware of my pattern) by packing one stage of my life away so that I could make a fresh start for the next. I spent much time packing up boxes to put in my closet the summer between high school and college.. Funny thing though, I was still me at college even though the "New Stage" had begun.

I used to categorize people in my mind. Categories included: "neat", "too neat" . . . "I feel fumbly", "nothing to worry about". Recently my categories have begun to fall apart.

Allen, the most handsome counselor at Camp Wapanacki (summer camp for visually handicapped children where we both worked) told me that I used to scare him. This was the same Allen whom I used to sit close enough to so that I could watch and listen - but far enough away from, in case I couldn't think of anything clever enough to say while eating Wapanacki Goulash in the camp dining room.

I visited the R.'s with L. as she began her home visiting project in January. E. and N. are parents who fit into my category of "too neat for me". They are intelligent, say what they think, have interesting careers of anthropologist and doctor. I wanted them to respect me since day one last year and often found myself feeling awkward around them.

Visiting with L., who was much more nervous than I was, gave me another opportunity to spend time with them in a relatively secure position since the focus would be on L. That morning N. dropped off O. and said she would get pizza so that we could have dinner while we were talking. The R.'s responded to L.'s questions respectfully and seriously. Her questions were formal and on an appropriate, "just getting to know each other level". E. and N. responded to the questions and often carried their responses to a more personal level than L. had asked. They had taken the opportunity to share as well as to teach L.

As L. ran out of questions, conversation turned to last month's parent-staff meeting, where parents evaluated the program, and then, more specifically, to discussion about me. As I glanced at L. confirming her "Is it time to go?" glance, E. poured more wine and began talking of his impressions of my growing between last year and now. N. . . . pretty . . . anthropologist . . . said she was scared and felt awkward when she first began bringing O. to the Family Center. These people in my "too neat" category think that I am neat . . .

I observe and get to know children as people at differing stages of growth. Within an individual child, some skills are more developed than others. I am beginning to observe and get to know adults as people at differing stages of growth. I see that within an individual adult some skills and characteristics are more developed than others. I see that my categories often prevent me from seeing a person as he or she is.

The continuum of categorization-integration also applies to curriculum. One of the strengths of our Family Center group is that the curriculum is genuinely and strongly based on us as a group of people. John's new hat . . . what kind of socks people are wearing . . . a bandaid on someone's finger . . . John changing his shirt . . . my necklaces . . . are all topics of curriculum. Activities we do flow into one another and have been developed in a way that makes sense to both adults and children. I have, at times, found myself "activity collecting" for the sake of activity. It is too bad that activity is too often seen as the definition of curriculum.

Cooking is a curriculum area that I have begun developing. We began with cooking macaroni and talking about how it changes from hard to soft. One day as John got down the box of macaroni, P. said, "It will get soft when we put it in the water." About two weeks later, P.'s Mom said P. had been asking what will happen when she cooked peas, spagetti, etc. at home. After a month of cooking several times a week, C. is saying "cooking". R. is aware of when the water starts boiling. N., who used to say, "cookie" when I said "cook" now asks for a spoon. J., O., R., P., N., S., have all begun doing more pretend cooking in the kitchen area. P.'s Mom brought in some recipes. C., N.'s mother, brought in oatmeal. M., R.'s father, comes in asking what are we going to cook today - and a curriculum area has begun to develop.

Some other caregivers borrowed the hotplate one day and cooked macaroni. They were excited that they had "cooked with their children" . . . and it is a start.

I question the value or significance of doing an activity only once or twice. This gives it little chance to become integrated into the child's framework of familiar experiences.

During my first year in New York, I basically had contact with N.Y. people and my family. Occasionally I would realize that I was the Amy Dombro who had organized Bagel Breakfasts for 200 people in the dorms at the University of Vermont - or that I was the Amy Dombro who had organized the Wapanacki Jogging Club (we would jog along a country road until we came to a huge tree where we would sprawl out and talk about things ranging from what it felt like to be blind to the latest popular song and then would jog back to camp being sure to appear very out of breath) - as well as the Amy Dombro who was working very hard to get adjusted to New York City. This year I have heard from people from many parts of my life. I feel very rich.

My awareness of this relationship between parts and the whole has been greatly influenced by my work this year with very young children. It is as if watching people at the beginning of growth has helped me see parts of growth which, until now, were unseparable from the whole.

My experiences with infants and toddlers has affected my awareness, as have experiences I have had with anthropology. I consider work with infants and toddlers a type of anthropology of people's development.

I spent a summer digging at an Indian site in Vergennes, Vermont. One afternoon a group of children about 10 years old stopped by to see what we were doing digging, lugging dirt and "getting excited over a box of rocks". We talked about the idea that Indians lived where we were standing and talking. I handed one of the children an artifact, or rock, depending on your perspective. He shifted the rock in his hand and gasped as his fingers naturally fell into a groove along one edge. He cut through the air with his hand. "A knife . . . this rock is really a knife."

New awareness of the relationship between the knife and rock and between us and the Indians who once lived in what was now a Vermont cornfield led to the gasp of wonder. Through snowsuits, boots, and spilled yogurt, working with young children has also led me to gasps of wonder.

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Appendix

This appendix contains a sample of materials I wrote for the parents. I found as the year progressed, that the more I shared my thoughts and perspectives about the program, the more thoughts and perspectives the parents shared. Our exchanges were based around the children. I feel very strongly that in programs for infants/toddlers, parent-staff interaction is a key ingredient in the development of a good program for the children.

If you would exchange materials written about/for your program, please be in touch with me:

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Our Room Is Us

I often wonder what people see when they look into our room . . .

A few Saturdays ago I came in to do some work. As I finished, two thoughts came to mind: a) the room was quiet and still and b) in some ways everyone's presence was reflected.

These are some of the things I see when I look at our room:

a red bandana. It is placed very deliberately on the closet door handle so that C. (13 months) can find it and pull it down when he wants to carry it around. The bandana is just like the one A. (9 months) wears sometimes.

pictures of animals. There are two pictures of a butterfly. One day before naps, S. (17 months) and J. (20 months) were looking at the Bunny Book which has two pages covered with butterflies. We said "butterfly" and found a picture that was already hanging up. John found another butterfly picture in our picture file and hung it up with S. and J. S. went over to the picture several times over the week. J. one day carried the book over to the pictures . . . and so we have two butterflies.

There is also a picture of a grasshopper. D. (32 months) and her father brought it in one morning to add to our collection. D. has taken several people over to the pictures to look at the one she and "mine daddy" brought for the Family Center.

posters in French that N.'s parents brought. N.'s (18 months) 'autos' are now sometimes called 'cars' and other times, 'autos' as N. is learning more words in both English and French. J. (20 months) talks about 'totos'. One day, N., J., and I went for a walk in Riverside Park. I called to N., "venez-ici pres de moi" - "come here a little closer to me". J., an English speaking child, called to N., "a rico ici preco".

a record player. The record player looks the same as it did in September, but it has grown to be an important part of our room. N.'s requests of "les disques" are followed by "encore". N., C.'s father, says the music is a nice way to start his day. One morning M. and C. arrived before me. I arrived to playing music. It was nice. J. (32 months) sings and talks about the songs that he and his mother sing on the bus. John puts on Saturday Night Fever and begins dancing, soon to be followed by many of us. A. (9 months) moves her head and bounces though she uses both hands to support herself. Often playing a record, singing and dancing sweeps through our whole room - a special sharing experience.

the green wooden box, large pillows that N.'s mother made covers for and the bolsters that F. and his parents carried in one morning were combined with our wooden boat to make a jumping area. I wonder if the collection looked like a pile of things we hadn't put away instead of an exciting, planned area. F. (32 months) took a powerful, strong jump off the platform into the pillows. D. (32 months) said, "I want to do it too." She got ready to jump, hesitated, and reached out to hold my hand. She climbed up again and this time jumped alone. "Look F.", she called out. They took many turns jumping together and laughing. C. (13 months) sprawls spread eagle on a large cushion. S. (17 months) dances on the platform and revels, I think, in the sound her shoes make on the wood. S. and N. (10 months) have both been studying belly buttons. This physical play gives them a terrific chance to learn about their body and others'. O. (17 months) and J. (20 months) both walk on the large pillows. O. plows in full speed ahead laughing as one foot sinks into the softness and then the next. J., right now, moves very deliberately. I see him working on keeping his balance. J.'s face is one of concentration.

There is lots more I see: the lampshade that C.'s father spent a half hour selecting - dried flowers from my Vermont gardening project - paper cups that J. has carried from home - an aquarium that M., D.'s father, is helping us balance - flowers that F. and his mother brought in - a baby carriage that S. and her parents brought one morning which led us into a good discussion on the concept of possession . . . . . .

it is our room _____

Amy
November 30, 1977

(I wrote this 'book' for parents to continue communicating about the program and to begin getting us, as a group, to think about moving into our new space.)

Our First Month Together

F. (31 months), D. (32 months), N. (10 months), C. (12 months) A. (7 months), S. (17 months), O. (16 months), L. (our student teacher), John and I have spent much time over the past four weeks. We spent much time exploring:

- music

N.'s request 'disque' brings on the music. J. and C. immediately respond with knees bending, arms waving, heads swaying. We have listened to records, played instruments once or twice; each child has played the piano in the auditorium. D., J., and I took a trip to listen to the older children's chorus practicing. D. was captivated. J. clapped his hands. We sing spontaneously often . . . on walks, in the rocking boat.

- listening

Animal sounds have been a "thread of interest" which was first spun by K., S.'s mother, who looked through a picture animal book and made terrific sounds with a group of children. The thread travels along this path -- K.'s animal sounds -- looking at N.'s pictures up on the wall which the children walk over to and then make sounds -- S.'s dog and pigeon sounds when we pass dogs and pigeons on our walks -- a trip to the pet store for fish where D. listened with her ear to an aquarium to hear the fish.

We constantly explore the sounds of words.

Everything from smiling at A. and making sounds when changing her pamper, to telling F. and D. that, "those flowers are called geraniums", to giving C. and O. pieces of sticky tape when we hang up pictures, to listening to 'pop' beads 'pop' with S., to J.'s "toto" after being around N.'s French for two weeks is part of our experience together.

- movement

We have done much active, physical play . . . rolling, swinging, jumping, climbing. I learn much about my moving from the children. I'd say that out of the at least 30 trips made down our hallway each week, very few are the same - running, swinging arms, crawling, jumping, riding/pushing/pulling the cart, giant steps, walking slowly, or being low to the floor makes each trip different.

- trips

A trip is an activity we have used often already to "individualize" parts of our day. Taking a trip with one or two children:

a. gives those children intimate contact with me or John and gives John and me close contact with the child,

b. can follow up an interest expressed by an individual child (One afternoon S. showed a keen interest in L.'s red umbrella. We took a trip with L. to the front door to watch L. open up her red umbrella and go out into the rain.),

c. brings the "real world" and "real activities" into the child's daily experience,

d. brings the "real world" of being an adult with children to our experience as caregivers (It took me awhile to be able to maneuver a carriage into a fruit market - insight into the parents' experience who can't save the shopping until after work and the children have gone home.),

e. is fun and provides a refreshing break from the group for both children and adults (O. and John came back from a subway ride one morning exuding excitement of a shared adventure.).

Trips we have taken so far include:

a. playing and picnic at St. John the Divine Park

b. S. and L. went to the donut shop where they sat at the counter to eat a donut.

c. N., S., and I went to the Columbia Campus. We watched part of a football game and climbed up and down steps.

d. D., O., and John went to the pet store for plants for our aquarium.

e. N., D., and I went to the supermarket where D. found the crackers all by herself and then to the bakery where we bought croissants for me to take to my grandparents.

- and books

After lunch, we read as part of our transition into naps. J., S., and O. search for the page with the butterflies in the Bunny Book. N. still chooses 'les autos' in The Busiest Book. One day D. and I wrote a book about D. and her sister.

We have developed several experiences into 'threads of experience'. As an experience is drawn out, it gives the children the comfortable sense of something familiar, an in-depth way to explore something from many perspectives and a sense of mastery. There is also a sense of "this makes sense" which is needed by us adults. Many everyday aspects of our life at the Family Center (bandanas, umbrellas, clothing) have been purposely integrated into our program. Our program is developing from the people in it.

Getting to know each other is one of our 'threads of experience'. It begins like this:

J. picks up C.'s shoe and saying, "C.'s shoe", takes the shoe to C. - O. pushes N. down the hall in the milk carton with wheels - John has an attentive audience when he changes his shirt - A. fingered my necklace for five minutes one day - S. and N. play peek-a-boo with the curtained corner closet . . .

and will continue for the rest of the year.

Amy
October, 19, 1977

(I wrote this 'book' for parents to continue sharing my ideas of curriculum. I found that as I shared my ideas, parents shared their ideas and our program grew stronger.)

Caregivers are a given key ingredient in any group care setting for infants and toddlers. The Bromley-Heath Guide to the Care of Infants in Groups by Edward Tronick and Patricia Marks Greenfield observes: "An infant care center is people. It is a place where adults set up an environment for very young humans to grow and develop. It is not a spatial layout; not a curriculum; not a set of toys; not a nutritional program; not any of these things, although it is all of these. What it is, is everything that goes on amongst all the people at the center, big and little."

My focus at this point is with the "big people" who will in large part shape the experience of a group care setting for the children and families involved--the caregivers. I am the Head Caregiver at the Bank Street Infant and Family Center. I work directly and daily with children ages 6 months-2½ years old and their families. I supervise student teachers in our setting who are beginning graduate study of very young children. I also have frequent contact with visitors, most often caregivers from other centers, who have come to observe. One of the results of spending everyday "amongst all the people, big and little" at the Family Center is that I have many questions concerning the group care setting for infants and toddlers.

"What is a good caregiver?" is one of the questions at the top of my list. I think most basically, that a good caregiver is one who is aware of and responsive to the individual developmental needs of the children and family members in the center within a group setting while at the same time being a member of a staff team. This one sentence reflects years of growth and development for any individual caregiver. The growing number of group care settings in response to societal demands does not allow for a staff member's years of growth in job preparation and yet there is pressing need for good caregivers. There are good caregivers and there can be more good caregivers. There must be more focus on growth and development of these key "big people". Anne Willis and Henry Ricciuti in, "A Good Beginning for Babies: Guidelines for Group Care have found, "need for further work to specify the nature of developmentally facilitating group care environments for infants, and for further development of explicit guidelines and principles for creating and maintaining such environments."

Caregivers dealing directly and daily with children and families in large part determine the nature of group care environments because they are the people who in reality create and maintain such environments.

I strongly urge that one specific way of "developmentally facilitating group care environments for infants" is to place the support and preparation of the caregiver as a growing and developing person in a most highly significant and valuable job high on the priority list of society and the individual child care center. Support must come in terms of dollars and cents. How can someone be expected to care for another's child, a task which requires focus and incredible giving, when he or she must in many cases work long, exhausting hours and not earn enough money to care adequately for personal family needs?

The growth and development of an adult as a caregiver is a complex process. The young age of the children involved introduces inherent special demands as well as special rewards. The young age of the children often reflects the young age of a family and thus the new experience of parenting for the parents. The young age of the children involved often confronts the adults with their own basic values. A group care setting for infants and toddlers is a place where both children and adults are growing. I perceive growth as involving movement. Growing and developing as an individual caregiver in a setting where everyone else is also growing and developing has the end result of much to be aware of. Let alone basic knowledge of child development (complex enough by itself and yet on some level of awareness necessary for the caregiver to have), the developing caregiver must contend with not only his/her own feelings of excitement, potential, "I'll never get it!" and the many others that accompany growth but with those of the surrounding people.

I kept written track of my growth and development as a caregiver for an entire year- my first year of being in charge of the Family Center at Bank Street. The end product was titled, "Running and Swirling and Banging into Walls": Autobiography of a Caregiver. It was submitted and accepted in

partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master of Science in Education Degree at Bank Street College of Education. I completed the two year program titled, "Infancy and Family Education". A combination of experiences including work with my advisor, course work, daily contact with the families of the then Family Center at Bank Street College and my writing has led to my perception of a caregiver as a growing and developing person in a highly complex setting. Honig and Lally's Infant Caregiving: A Design for Training acknowledges this. I want to see caregivers be responsive to individual needs of growing and developing children and families in supportive and growth promoting ways. I want to see caregivers responded to as growing and developing people with individual needs in supportive and growth promoting ways.

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